

Abstract 752

TITLE: Attitudes Towards and Experience with the Female Condom: Results of a Qualitative Study with Heterosexual Women and Male Injecting Drug users, and with Men who Have Sex with Men

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BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES: The emerging prevention technology of the "female" condom or "vaginal pouch" is becoming better known and more widely used among at-risk populations. This new technology may offer greater control over safer sex by receptive partners in vaginal and anal intercourse, who until this time had to rely upon penetrative partners to wear a traditional "male" condom. In addition, some users report that female condoms provide less loss of sensitivity than male condoms, and they thus may be more likely to be use them consistently. However, studies regarding knowledge of, attitudes towards, use of, and experience with the female condom among diverse populations remain limited. This study examines these issues through use of a qualitative interviews and analysis.

METHODS: The Health Living Project, an NIMH-funded intervention program for HIV-positive women, male injecting drug users (IDUs), and men who have sex with men (MSM), is a collaboration among research teams at Columbia University (New York City), UC San Francisco, UC Los Angeles, and the Medical College of Wisconsin (Milwaukee). Phase I of the study, which is concluding in August 1999, involves in-depth 2-3 hour individual interviews with members of all three sub-populations, including their attitudes towards and experience of sex and safer sex in general, and the female condom in particular. This presentation will draw upon newly coded and analyzed qualitative data from New York City for 39 women, IDUs, and MSM. These data, which have become available since July 1999, regard female condoms in the following areas: general knowledge of their existence; ability to describe them; knowledge of where to obtain them; experience of use; and decision-making about whether to use them.

RESULTS: Preliminary findings suggest knowledge of the female condom is widespread, although not always entirely accurate, and that most respondents believe that they would be able to obtain them. A minority of respondents have used the female condom, but those who have report widely differing experiences.

CONCLUSIONS: The presentation will highlight differences across the subpopulations, and suggest strategies for tailoring messages about female condoms for different groups. In particular, implications will be discussed for study participants who reported being heavily influenced by the sexual wishes of their partners and those who report finding male condoms to be uncomfortable or unpleasurable. As this data has just become available, analysis of the findings will be ongoing until the time of the conference.

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